The Music, The Moos, and The Murder

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 Serena Dayton could hear the music as she turned in on the driveway to Quinn MacDougall’s ranch.

 That made her smile.

 Some things never changed. Quinn loved music. When he wasn’t playing his guitar and singing, he was listening, loving the work of so many more artists.

 Continual music being played here had never changed.

Neither had the fenced pasture areas of the MacDougall ranch.

Putting her car into park, Serena felt her smile fade. She’d been here just a few times since the incident, but . . . only when it had been necessary. Because try as she might, there was no way *not* to remember why she’d stayed away through the years as she had grown from a high school student to a college graduate and then into a working member of society.

But she was here now. And nothing about the place seemed to have changed.

 She was even certain that it was Molly, the cow standing by the gate as if watching for her arrival, was the same cow, Molly, she had seen so times, and then especially on that long-ago day now when she had been the one to discover the body of Roy Granger, the ranch hand, a bloody mess in the middle of the pasture.

 But she had gotten to know Molly before that day, just as she had gotten to know Quinn. And somehow, with all she had lost that day, she had managed to lose Quinn as well.

 She gave herself a serious shake and exited the car, finding herself drawn to the fence—and the cow.

 It *was* Molly, she thought, wondering if it wasn’t a little bit strange that she could recognize a cow after many years. For a minute, she smiled. She had remained a pescatarian to this day because of Molly. She’d just gotten her driver’s license the day she had first driven over to the MacDougall ranch to practice with their teen-aged country-western band. Of course, their practices had been here. Quinn’s dad, Robb MacDougall, had been a rancher *and* a successful local musician. It was natural that she and Quinn and their friends should work on their own product here, with Robb to help them—a man who would tell them what was wrong, but with constructive criticism at every turn. And, they also had the old outbuildings that had been refitted with equipment, instruments, and acoustics that allowed for them to practice and record.

 But, while forever and always outfitted for music, it was still a working ranch. The cows were the breadwinners, but the family also kept several horses, dogs, and chickens as well.

 The ranch was just on the outskirts of Nashville, but when Serena had first come out here, it might have been a world away.

Quinn had grown up here with cows, horses, and music.

Serena had grown up in the heart of the city with both parents being professors at the university.

 “Molly?” she murmured, walking to the cow and reaching out to stroke the animal’s nose.

 She’d discovered, when first visiting, that cows were mammals very much like other mammals—well, maybe horses, and horses, of course, could be a little bit like dogs—fond of the people around them. Molly was a cow, but she had loved having her ears scratched. She had let out several “moos,” apparently talking to the other cows and several of them along with few of the calves had hurried to the fence, too, all hoping to have their ears scratched as well. She’d first seen Roy that day, waving to her with his big smile, and singing . . .

 He worked with Robb MacDougall in his band sometimes, and he sang to the cows when he worked in the pasture, and the horses in the stables. He even sang to the chickens!

 And she’d been standing there, scratching cow ears, listening to Roy’s song when Quinn had come out to find her, laughing as he saw that she had become involved in her task of scratching all the cows’ ears.

 “The question here should be, are they dairy cows!” Quinn had said somberly.

 She’d frowned instantly, realizing what he was saying. “No, no, really, um, I mean . . . “

 And Quinn had laughed with an easy grin and assured her, “No. My dad’s family has always raised dairy cows. But not many people realize that cows can be affectionate which is, I guess, a good thing for those people who raise cows that, um—aren’t dairy cows.”

 So, that day, she’d realized that cows could show affection like—and that she had a serious crush on Quinn.

 Somehow, Quinn had also had a crush on her and for that time in their lives, they’d been inseparable, friends, musicians . . .

 Lovers, about to graduate, certain that they’d marry and head to college together.

 But, somehow, with what had happened, she’d been the one to destroy that as well.

 They’d been together almost a year when she’d come to the ranch, early for practice, naturally, to spend some time alone with Quinn, when she’d heard Molly mooing like crazy.

 And Molly might have been a cow, but it had surely sounded like a call of distress.

 And it had been.

Molly’s plaintive mooing that had led Serena into the heart of the pasture where she had found the cow and others almost circled around Roy Granger, one of Robb MacDougall’s hands.

 He had lain on the ground, and it had appeared that he had managed to fall when something had scared the animals in the pasture, sending them into a scared stampede. He had been smashed and blooded and Serena had screamed and screamed, and the MacDougall family had come, arriving from various places right behind her, and Jim Barry, Roy’s assistant ranch manager and one of Robb’s band members had come running from the back of the house . . .

And the police had come and then the coroner and while many things had been curious about the man’s death, the shape of his body, in the end, it had been ruled an accident.

 Roy’s body had been broken. But he had died of asphyxia. It was curious that his neck had been broken, but there was so much broken that it was impossible for a team of medical examiners to determine exact cause of death, though *method* appeared to be trampling. Death by accident.

Possibly because he had fallen, because the creatures he tended—who loved him—had crowded around him. Perhaps in his distress he had been the one to scare them into fleeing and running around him, causing the broken bones.

 That day had been the end for Serena. She’d loved the band, no more.

 She’d loved Quinn . . .

 But she couldn’t come to the ranch anymore and she couldn’t explain. She simply didn’t believe that the cows had done it. Roy Granger had been a good man, a man who had scratched the ears of the cows as well, called each by name, sung to them, known every calf born every year. It had upset her, while her suggestions that someone else had been in the paddock and caused whatever had really happened to happen had been met with dismay by everyone. Even her parents believed that she cared for the cows that meant she couldn’t accept the truth. Quinn’s parents and Quinn himself had been distressed, hurt by the loss of a beloved friend themselves, and she probably caused them to hurt worse as she insisted the cows hadn’t done it.

 And, of course, if the cows hadn’t done it, then what? Roy Granger had been the only one at the paddock when it happened; Robb had just arrived home after practicing with his group for an upcoming performance when Serena had started screaming, Quinn’s mom, Ann, returned right after from shopping, Roy had come in from the practice and headed to the stables just before Serena had heard the mooing and gone into the center of the paddock and Quinn himself had gotten to the drive just ahead of her.

 As the days passed, those at the ranch had been in mourning; Roy had worked for Robb MacDougall’s father, and he had been just about a family member forever, beloved. Jim Barry, Roy’s young protégé, had taken up the workload as necessary, but like Ann MacDougall, he had given away to tears frequently.

 Serena had only known Roy as a friend, a good man, one always gentle and patient with animals and just as wonderful with people as well. A man who always had a smile and a song on his lips.

The only sanity for Serena had been to stay away. Roy Granger had been broken. Something inside Serena had been broken as well.

But today . . .

“Still fond of old Molly, eh?”

She smiled, her smile a little sad, as she turned. Quinn had come to her at the paddock just as he had that day so long ago.

“Molly seems to be doing well enough,” she said.

He nodded, scratching the cow’s ears himself. “She’s an old girl, but a good girl You know that my dad never . . .”

“Never turns an animal into dog food?” Serena asked.

He nodded, his eyes on the cow. “Never,” he said quietly. And Serena knew that he was thinking about the day that Roy had died, and while a ‘stampede’ had been blamed, none of the animals had been euthanized for the deed.

Quinn turned to her to shrug, raise his brows slightly, and offer her a weak smile.

He was still Quinn. He had gone on to work in the music business himself, sometimes performing still, but he now had a small chain of studios and produced some recent acts that were wildly popular, from country music to pop.

And, of course, he was still a good six-foot-three, in perfect physical condition, with the most unique and enigmatic amber eyes she’d ever seen. A handsome man, a striking man. She hadn’t seen him often through the years, but they had mutual friends and acquaintances and she’d heard he’d remained as down to earth as a man might, ready to much out a stall when necessary, to help out at the ranch whenever needed.

“So, are you ready for this?” he asked.

She managed a real smile. “Of course. It’s for the scholarship program and the library. I’ve met so many kids who are wonderfully talented but wind up having to drop out for financial reasons. We won’t be able to help all of them, but if we can help any of them . . .”

“We’re going to help many of them,” Quinn assured her. His smile was small and a little sad, she though. “So. How have you been doing?”

“Great. I love teaching.” She grimaced. “I see talent in others I never had myself, and that’s . . . I don’t know. I think my talent is finding talent.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“I have a kid right now who is going to bowl them over when she makes it to the opera!”

“Not everyone has that range, and not everyone enjoys opera. First, you’re a good song writer, and secondly, you may not have an opera range, but you carry a tune exceptionally well.” He hesitated, shrugging. “I wasn’t sure that you’d agree to come back and work with our old high school group, but I’m grateful you’ve agreed. I was surprised myself by the enthusiasm that the announcement we’d be bringing our ‘Rockin’ the Country’ to perform at the benefit conference. Apparently, according to the organizers, they sold a zillion tickets after it was announced.”

“Then I’m truly glad,” Serena assured him.

He was still just studying her. “I’ve missed you,” he said quietly.

She winced, looking downward. There had been a time when it had seemed that the world didn’t even revolve if he wasn’t in it. And through the years . . .

As if echoing her thoughts, Quinn told her, “I wish . . . well, if you ever want just coffee, dinner, drinks . . . I, um, all right, flatly, right out there, I’ve not been a saint, I’ve dated, I’ve been around, I’ve almost had a few relationships . . . but this is ridiculously sudden and out there, but . . .”

“I’ve missed you, too, Quinn. It wasn’t you, it was . . .”

“LOL. It wasn’t you, it was me?” he asked.

“I . . .”

“You still think that Roy was murdered.”

“I do. And not by the cows.”

 “But no one was here.”

 “That we know about!”

 He let out a long breath, looking downward. “My parents were in so much pain. I was in pain. My father thought at first that they might have wanted the herd euthanized and they knew that Roy would have loathed the very idea and . . . it was bad, and it was extremely difficult to pick up all the pieces and my dad stopped playing his music to get the ranch going again. Now, he and mom spend most of their time at a condo in Daytona Beach and Jim manages the ranch.” He shrugged. “He still works in music sometimes, but does his own thing. He hired a few kids to help out and . . . I dome when I want to work on my own things.” He hesitated. “I’ve missed you,” he told her. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m no saint. I’ve . . . I’ve almost had a few relationships. But every time I come close to someone . . .

“Ouch! Oh, Quinn, don’t think that every girl out there is as messed up as me!” she said quietly.

“No. I don’t think that,” he said, smiling and reaching out to smooth a lock of her hair that had fallen against her cheek. “They just aren’t you,” he added softly, before appearing to be impatient with himself. “Come on, let’s head to our practice studio.” He glanced at his watch. “We’re still a bit early. We can watch some old video! No, Roy is in some of it—”

 “I would love to watch some old video—especially if Roy is in it! He was a great guy—talented in so many ways—and you’re right. It’s good to remember him that way,” Serena said.

 He shrugged. “All right then!”

 They headed toward the outbuilding just beyond the house where they had once held all their rehearsal sessions, where they had recorded for various events.

 There was a large screen that could display lyrics—as kids, they’d all considered themselves to be song writers and they’d done all right with a few of them.

 But the screen could also display video.

 Before he had come upon her, Quinn had apparently been watching old footage.

 She paused just inside the door, staring at the screen. Roy was there, the mic in his hand. Robb MacDougall was drumming.

 “Have a seat!” he told her, brining up one of the swivel chairs that usually sat in front of the computer.

 She sat. And she smiled. Quinn, a younger Quinn, appeared in the video, playing his guitar.

 “One of my father’s numbers,” he told her. “It got fairly popular.”

 She smiled. “I remember, and I hear it now and then on the radio.”

 “Ah, and I had imagined that you’d have a song list! All set and—”

 “I do have a song list. But sometimes, I just turn on a station to see what is being played,” Serena said, smiling at him.

 “Ah, do you ever listen to our music?” he queried, grinning. “Or did—”

 “I listen to our music, yes. I just . . . Quinn! I guess enough time has passed, and maybe I’ll never be able to explain, it’s just . . . you grew up with cows! City kid here. I was amazed by the creatures. And Roy tended to the cows as if they were a pack of puppies. He was kind to them, he sang to them—and I’m telling you, the cows loved it!”

 “Well, they’d have never hurt him on purpose. We all knew that. And I guess I can understand your anger—”

 “It wasn’t anger.”

 “Why did you throw me out, too?” he asked.

 She winced, looking downward, and then meeting his eyes. “It was . . . it was coming back here.”

 “You’re here now.”

 “The cause means a great deal to me.”

 “But I didn’t?”

 “No! I . . . “

She broke off again and shook her head. “I’ll never be able to explain. “I, um,” she paused again, wincing. “It’s a little late, but I’ve kept up with you through our mutual acquaintances, and I’ve always been so happy to hear that you’re doing well and . . .”

“So, there’s no one in your life either?”

The way he looked at her then made it seem that time was erased in a flash. That they’d never been apart.

“I almost was a saint,” she said softly. “I dated a few men, but . . .”

“But?”

“They weren’t you,” she said, smiling at last.

He laughed suddenly. “You know I have a condo in the city now. But I’m happy to pick you up for dinner, or coffee, or drinks.”

She laughed, reaching out to touch his face, wondering if it was possible to go back when so much time had elapsed.

After what had happened.

“We’ll never know if we don’t give it another chance!” she told him.

“Done deal. Want to start tonight? It is a Friday—you don’t teach on Saturdays, right?”

“I do not!”

His face was so close to hers . . . so very close. He leaned toward her. They were going to kiss, to feel as if time truly had evaporated.

But his phone suddenly rang. Loudly!

He winced, reaching for it, answering it quickly. “Yeah?”

He listened. “I’ll be right there.”

He ended the call and looked at her. “That was Josh. He’s just about a mile out, but he got a flat. He asked if I’d give him a hand to hurry it all along or to just sweep him up and worry about the flat later. I’ll be right back.”

He stood and hurried toward the door before pausing, “Probably good I didn’t get any closer. I wouldn’t have wanted to stop.”

She smiled and waved. “Get Josh. Steven should arrive shortly. We’ll work, and then dinner.”

“And then whatever?” he asked hopefully.

“And then whatever!” she agreed.

How ridiculous was it? She was still in love with the man, all these years later!

He was gone. She went to the computer, looking for old videos. Then she hit the wrong button and laughed. Of course. The computer was on Wi-Fi. And she had just drawn up a news program.

She saw that their benefit event was being advertised. A picture of their old group, as they once appeared at an area fair, burst on the scene.

Then other performers were shown. Bits of music played at their pictures flashed on the screen.

She frowned suddenly; paused and went back.

There was a picture of Jim Barry on the screen; the announcer was talking about Jim’s great hit, the song, “My Pick-Up Truck.”

And there was Jim, singing it.

Suddenly, everything rushed back to her.

*The song! The song, she had heard that song so often before, and not by Jim Barry!*

It had been Roy Granger’s song! He had sung it to the cows, over and over again, and she remembered asking him about it one day and him telling her that he might have a chance at the true big-time with it and . . .

She took a breath.

No. Okay, he’d never done anything with the song, so, of course, Jim Barry had heard him sing it, too, so now . . .

*She was being ridiculous, and way too late!*

But what if . . .

*No! Jim Barry wouldn’t, couldn’t have murdered Roy Granger—for a song?*

But she jumped up, curious, and even if it made Quinn mad, she had to tell him. Tell him that the song a gentle man had sung to cows day after day was now about to make another man famous.

Dear lord!

Jim had been at the ranch even before her that day, somewhere in the back. He’d come running around when she’d started screaming and the others had begun arriving . . .

She leapt up, bursting out the door, anxious to reach Quinn before he could get out to the road.

But his car was driving away even as she shouted his name.

Even as she turned.

And found Jim Barry there, staring at her.

Reading her mind.

He wasn’t as tall as Quinn, no in anywhere near as fit. He was in his early to mid-thirties now, Serena thought, casually good-looking, cultivating a country-western look with his plaid shirt, denim jeans, and the lock of hair that fell over his forehead.

“So, I heard the commercial as you bolted out of the room,” he said.

“You killed Roy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You killed him—for his song!”

“Everyone will think you’re being ridiculous.”

“There’s no statute of limitations on a murder charge. You tried to blame it on cows! But I know what you did. I know that you did it. The cows loved him—”

Well, of course, she was being an idiot. But she’d been right all along. And now, with his behavior, she could prove it! Okay, maybe she couldn’t prove it, but she could put enough doubt in the minds of others to ruin his life . . . to get Roy’s song back, some form of justice!

“The cows loved him indeed, just as they love you!” he roared.

He lunged at her. She turned to run, but she was wearing a skirt, and he caught the end of it, causing her to catapult to the ground. And he was on her in two seconds.

Straddled above her, staring down at her. “You stupid bitch! It was better, so much better, when you just stayed the hell away from here!” he roared.

She wasn’t trained to fight, but she had a will to survive. Not just for herself, right now. But for the truth.

“You love the cows, right? You love the damned cows so much!”

He was up, dragging her to her feet. She scratched and clawed at him, she caught him in several places, giving him a good gash across the cheek. But that just increased his anger and in a second, he had her through the gate and into the center of the paddock.

“You want to know how I did it? Yeah, I broke his damned neck and then let the cows have the rest of it!”

He let go of her arm to reach for her neck. And he was stronger than she was, even if she’d managed to make him bleed. But she couldn’t stop fighting. She slammed against him with her knee, using all her strength. He screamed, falling back in agony.

And that’s when she was saved.

She heard . . . the moos.

Not distressed moos. Angry moos! And suddenly, there was Molly, moving toward the man with her impressive size and strength.

The cow knocked him over.

She turned to run. He was up and after her but . . .

Other cows moved in.

Serena ducked and turned and twisted. He fell and got up. He made his way around.

But she was almost to the gate and the cows were moving after him.

She felt fingers in her hair; she was being wrenched back . . .

But she heard a tremendous swack! Her hair was released, and she fell forward.

Right into Quinn’s arms. He held her, as if she was the most precious creature in the world. All around, the cows were now bellowing. They had surrounded Jim Barry where he had fallen to the earth of the paddock.

They were pawing the ground.

And, of course, Serena began to speak to them softly, sing to them, as Roy had sung to them, telling them to ease down. Because Quinn was there, and Josh was behind him and . . .

She didn’t want him to die; she didn’t want the cows to kill him. They deserved better.

And Jim Barry had to have his day in court and the talent that had been Roy Granger’s needed to be returned to him, in his honor.

She could hear that Josh was calling the police as Quinn stepped forward, reaching down to draw Jim Barry to his feet.

“You bastard. Serena knew the truth all along,” Quinn said.

“She’s um, full of it! She just wanted to come out and play with the cows, always scratching their damned ears—”

It was almost as if Molly understood English perfectly. She let out a bellowing moo that was like a blast against the man.

They could already hear sirens.

And soon . . . the police were there. And Jim Barry was under arrest for attempted murder—the rest would have to follow.

They never really got a chance to rehearse that day. There was just too much activity. They did talk, but mostly, they were all amazed at Serena’s strange belief in the truth, amazed that she’d been alone with Jim Barry for just minutes and that . . .

“He was an idiot,” Steve, their drummer, determined.

“He could have gotten away with it, no proof, no evidence, if he hadn’t been afraid of what Serena would do,” Josh agreed.

“But . . .” Quinn said, looking at Serena and shaking his head. “You knew! All right, let’s shake this place for now. Dinner.”

“I’m a bit of a mess,” she said.

“We’ll go to an outdoor café!” Josh said.

Serena looked at Quinn. She knew that he had meant their dinner alone.

But that was all right.

Because . . .

Well, they’d be together after dinner, and . . .

Maybe his thoughts were the same. Because he just smiled at Josh and then Steve and he stepped behind her, whispering in her ear.

“After dinner,” he told her. “And . . . I’m praying, forever after after!”

She smiled.

They were heading out.

“Just one more thing!” she said as they headed out to the cars.

“What’s that?” Josh asked. “We’ll all just clear tomorrow. We can get in all the rehearsing that we need. I have a feeling we’ll get back together just fine.”

“Oh, I believe so, too!” she agreed. She smiled at Quinn, loving his touch against her shoulders. “Just before dinner, there’s one more thing that I must do!”

“And that is . . ?” Quinn asked.

“Thank the cows!” she told him. “And you can all help me! Every one of them gets a good scratch, but Molly gets the most, because she is the best musician among us!”

They all grinned.

Because no one was going to argue that!